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ABSTRACT

Situational studies comprised one part of a multiperspective approach to evaluation of the social studies curriculum in British Columbia, Canada. Situational studies were defined as settings in which daily interactions occurred among the subjects, and were based on two suppositions: that the interaction of students and educators created social studies programs, and that individuals brought to their situations experiences and motives which influenced their views of school programs. Five settings were chosen, based on the following criteria: a cross section of elementary and secondary schools; a good mix of teachers and administrators; and pupils drawn from grades 4, 8, and 12. Evaluation methods included interviews, observation, school visitation, and mail or telephone follow-up. Implications of using situational studies include: the complementary aspect to factual testing; the appreciation of subjective impressions; and the introduction of sociological and anthropological methodologies to curriculum evaluation. (MH)

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WORKING PAPER

CURRICULUM EVALUATION: A SITUATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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CURRICULUM EVALUATION: A SITUATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Curriculum evaluation, reflecting a situational perspective presupposes a particular outlook and an interest of knowledge that is inherently different from conventional evaluative approaches. For the Assessment Program in British Columbia, situational studies formed one component of a multiperspective approach employed to evaluate the provincial social studies program.* As such, situational studies were not constituted as a separated evaluation but part of a 'complement' for gaining a broad understanding of the nature of social studies teaching. Such information provided recommendations to assist provincial revision activities.

Basis for the Evaluation

Conduct for evaluating situations is rooted in the writings of Jurgen Habermas, a German social philosopher, who examined critically the early philosophical issues of European science. Habermas contended that a critical philosophy differs from the unreflective stance of 'the positivistic self-understanding of the sciences' in that the examination demonstrates a specific connection between methodological rules of scientific activity and underlying structures of social interest. In other words modes of inquiry are not neutral (as we usually assume); rather our goals and ways of looking at the world represent a particular knowledge orientation because of a fundamental interest. This distinction in inquiry suggests:

> the approach of the empirical-analytic sciences incorporates a technical cognitive interest; that of the historical-hermeneutic sciences incorporates a practical one; and the approach of critically oriented sciences incorporates the emancipating cognitive interest that, as we saw, was at the root of traditional theories. (1972: 308)

The importance of these 'cognitive' interests Habermas argues is not that they serve as unquestioned prescriptions or representations for inquiry but as problematic features that influence ways of creating social structures and relationships with which we must come to terms. Our viewpoints of apprehending reality originate with an interest that is tied to a medium (work, language or power) of creating social organization. Inherent in these interests are three forms of possible knowledge:

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* Four detailed reports and a summary report document the evaluative activities of the British Columbia Social Studies Assessment.

information that extends technical control and certainty; interpretations that create mutual understanding of social cultural situations; and analyses that free individual consciousness from dependence upon socially imposed structures. Consequently, knowledge can serve as an instrument of a particular interest, or as a process of self-reflection. Habermas contends that only through a dialectic relationship in which we question and reconstruct the order of inquiry that has been taken for granted are we able to demonstrate what interests are concealed.

The methodological framework for studying situations is reflective of Habermas' historical-hermeneutic form of science. As a mode of evaluative inquiry, this form of science has mutual understanding as its fundamental interest. The concern is to understand the 'subjective' meaning of the structures and rules that are socially constructed in situations. In this instance, understanding stresses communicative experience rather than sensory experience, a form of knowing underlying observations that are expressed in descriptive statements. Description rendering sensory experience Habermas contends (1973) is a different kind of language from accounts providing communicative experience. In the first instance denotative expressions identify things and happenings whereas in the latter instance personal utterances are interpreted. Procedures for validating descriptions are not constituted in the formalized language of nomethetic statements and objectified experience but rather with the interpretation of daily forms of language individuals use. Instead of assuming the existence of a world structure independent of the knower, validation acknowledges a situation inherent of subjective meanings that are socially constructed and shared by peoples' activities and interactions of daily life. Procedures for validating the the interpretations, therefore, require a shared understanding between the researcher and the people in the situation. Moreover, it is acknowledged the process is mediated by the pre-understandings of the interpreter (the evaluator) which requires clarification as he strives to understand the situation of study.

Planning Situational Studies

Planning of situational studies for the social studies assessment occurred during a time when contributions of qualitative evaluation were gaining recognition. Approaches acknowledging educational connoiseurship (Eisner, 1977), portrayal evaluation (Stake, 1977) and classroom life (Jackson, 1968) were being proposed as 'thick descriptions' of educational settings. At the same time, some of our research (Rothe, 1978, Wilson, 1978) was formulating evaluative approaches for uncovering subjective meanings that gave people significance or value to their daily life. We realized that our approach would be exploratory, that as 'strangers' to the situation we would have limited time to engage in dialogue and share with participants their social reality and that our interest would be in understanding particular situations, in contrast to generali-

zability about schools in the province. Moreover, we began to realize that the popularized 'case study' approach although providing an in-depth understanding tends to reflect descriptions based upon sensory experience. Instead, we wanted an interpretative approach that would provide a description (communicative experience) of how 'insiders' made sense of their situation. Such efforts, we assume, would provide an interpretation of reasons and choices which suggest meanings pupils and educators give to social studies.

As a consequence of our approach, a situation became viewed as a setting in which the daily interactions of people occur. A study of each situation presupposes that the interaction of pupils and educators creates social studies programs and that individuals bring to their situations, experiences and motives which color the meanings they give to school programs. In turn, the community and educational context influence how teachers construct the intents, class activities and school resources of a social studies program. It is this interplay between the individual's aims and his context that constructs one's view of a situation.

Based on the premise that educators and students interpret social studies according to their experiences within their social context, we described situations according to what we observed and what was stated by teachers and students. However, we interpreted these descriptions with reference to frameworks that acknowledged an 'insider's' perspective of a situation.

Procedures for Situational Studies

The interest in gaining a subjective understanding of school situations rather than a sense of certainty about all schools in the province required two major tasks. The first task involved the identification of schools and collection of information of selected educational settings. Our selection of schools was not systematic; it reflected a concern to interact with people in situations thought to be diverse and unique for the teaching of social studies. Moreover, we realized restrictions in terms of time and money. Consequently, we chose the following five settings:

1. an urban setting with a high multi-ethnic pupil population;
2. a northern community with a high percentage of Native pupils;
3. a suburban setting with a large residential population;
4. a setting of a small, established service community;
5. a rural setting within a small school district.

Generally, within each particular setting, the selection of school situations and interviews with teachers and students was the responsibility of a local contact person. We did request that each situation consist of a cross-section of elementary and secondary schools, that there be a good composition of teachers and administrators

and that the pupils in the study be from grades 4, 8 and 12. The latter request was made to complement arrangements for achievement testing at the same grade levels. At first, we had reservations about the 'bias' that might emerge from a local person selecting the schools, staff and students. However, we began to realize that during our visits to situations that the selection, to some extent, portrayed an understanding of an 'ethos' that might have been glossed over by selection procedures external to the situation. We also realized that our activities depended upon the school timetables and the availability of school staff and students. Often, the availability of teachers was "whoever had a preparation period". However, in all cases individuals were keen to talk about their situations.

Interview and observation procedures were similar for each of the five situational studies. One evaluator conducted all the interviews with students. Three other evaluators shared in the school visitation. Their field responsibilities were to interview school staff and district personnel and observe school facilities. Each study involved two days in the situation and additional follow-up, either by mail or phone. A series of informal visits (prior to the situational studies) to schools and interviews with staff and students concerning their understanding of social studies helped to generate two frameworks that acknowledged the perspective of people in the situation. These frameworks provided the basis for a series of open-ended interview questions that encouraged individuals to describe (and define) their situation and later provided a reference for interpreting underlying meanings that students and teachers give to social studies. The interpretation of conversation from interview and write-up represented the second procedural task. One framework was used to interpret how teachers and administrators view a social studies program. Interpretations were described in terms of:

1. Intents

   These are expressions of desired goals or possibilities for a program. They may be a manifestation of written instructional objectives or implicit desires of individuals.

2. Resources

   These are resource materials that display a particular means with which students and teachers interact in an instructional setting. Resources can be a picture, a page in a textbook, a map, or a film which displays some object of the environment.

3. Activities

   This component of a program refers to student and teacher activities defined in the context of intents and resources. Class activities may either be predefined by teachers or result from interactions of students and teachers. Activities that are often a part of a social studies program are lectures, class discussions, field studies or simulations.

(Aoki et al, 1977: 27)

We assumed that these components of a program do not exist in isolation but are closely interrelated. For example, the intent a teacher has for teaching social studies will also be manifested in his view of resources and desired class activities. It is this 'total picture' of how teachers interpret a program in a particular context that becomes the focus of the interpretation.

The second framework is concerned with interpreting the meanings individuals give to classroom activities, units of study, and approaches to teaching social studies. This framework outlines four areas of personal meaning or 'being', described below. We assumed that all areas of being are experienced by individuals at one time or another.

Passive Area of Being

From this stance a person does not view himself as the primary initiator of his own actions but rather as one who 'lives out' the expectancies of others. Values and meanings are perceived as 'given' in the situations in which one exists.

Immediate Area of Being

From this viewpoint, a person tends to be concerned only about new pleasurable experiences to fight off boredom. It is the present which is of paramount importance, and little responsibility is taken for choices made.

Responsible Area of Being

Here, decisiveness and self-determination are key qualities. Such a person makes choices and assumes full responsibility for them in terms of other peoples' welfare. He realizes that other people are affected by his decisions.

Transcendent Area of Being

Living from this perspective, a person feels most truly 'himself'. His experiences in life are somehow more vivid to him. Choices are increasingly based on trusting personal intuitions and a sense of the spiritual dimensions of life. Qualities such as social harmony and justice and religious ideals are prized.

(Aoki et al, 1977: 27-28)

In summary, our evaluation approach acknowledged that teachers and pupils interpret social studies according to their experiences within their social contexts. Individuals give meanings to social studies because of their place in daily life situations which are comprised of activities with people, learnings, social tasks, physical objects, and circumstances. Since it is assumed that meanings occur in the relationship people have with their social worlds, an understanding of the social studies program requires an investigation of the individuals' situational meanings from the perspectives of the individuals involved.

Conclusions of Situational Studies

The following evaluative statements from Interpretive Studies of Selected School Situations (Aoki et al., 1977) portray some of the understandings gained from each of five situations:

> The acknowledgement by teachers of student and community life indicates a Responsible area of being. Concern to have students become better Canadians by acquiring knowledge of Canada appears a worthy consideration. However, the lack of a focus in school programs on the ethnic diversity of the local community could be viewed as an attempt by schools to socialize students into Canadian life without sufficient consideration for the often espoused ideals of a pluralistic society.
>
> (p.25)

> Resource and classroom activities, although differing in nature from class to class, become viewed as means for teaching knowledge outlined in the guides rather than possibilities for making teacher decisions concerning program development. This kind of interpretation would appear to be particularly strong where the availability of resources consists mostly of prescribed provincial resources and where teachers seem to make decisions about teaching according to the kinds of resources that are available.
>
> (p.41)

> The teachers interviewed in the northern rural setting appear to interpret Social Studies mainly in terms of the elementary and secondary curriculum guides. Meanings given to teaching approaches and decisions as to what to teach therefore become interpreted with reference to the knowledge outlined in the guide book. Students tend to view the selection of content and teaching approaches by teachers in terms of an immediate sense of personal enjoyment or boredom, pleasure or dissatisfaction.
>
> (pp.40-41)

> The intention of the secondary teachers interviewed is to teach the content outlined in the curriculum guides. The content outlined as 'formal' knowledge of people, places and activities is supported to some degree by the academic training of most teachers in Geography and History. Moreover, a sense of 'teaching isolation' arising from the context of some rural communities seems also to contribute to a dependency by teachers upon the curriculum guide as a prescription rather than a suggestion as to what knowledge should be taught.
>
> (p.41)

> Teachers and administrators interviewed in this situation express diverse views of Social Studies and professional development. While some educators view pupil and community needs as important factors, others understand Social Studies in terms of provincial curriculum guides or personal academic interests. Among those who frame Social Studies intents in terms of academic disciplines, knowledge of content and/or skills are important emphases.
>
> (p.69)

> Some teachers and students seem to give meanings to Social Studies that suggest an Immediate area of being. Their personal satisfaction or concern about what content and teaching approaches should be used, appear

> to be reflected in the community's expectations of school programs. However, some teachers provided comments indicating a desire for future involvement suggesting a Responsible area of being. Furthermore, the extensive evaluation of school programs by the staff of one elementary school would suggest willingness for on-going development of curriculum at particular school levels.
>
> (p.57)

> It would appear that many of the secondary teachers interviewed do not view community interests and activities as worthy enough to be included as major intents in their Social Studies programs. Instead, their understanding of Social Studies is interpreted according to their academic interests, their interpretation of the provincial curriculum guides, and their view of available resources. Moreover, some teachers give personal meanings that suggest the Ministry of Education takes the initiative for program development. Their concern is for a provincial prescription that outlines a more definitive statement of intents, knowledge, and methods of dealing with course content."
>
> (p.82)

Implications of Situational Studies

The significance of conducting situational studies became apparent both during and subsequent to the provincial assessment activities. One implication is the 'complementarity' of the interpretive understandings of situational studies with the factural information of paper/pencil tests. In the provincial assessment of social studies in-depth studies of school situations were rejected during the initial stage of planning. Only during the conduct of the assessment did the management committee realize the importance of having 'personal' contact with students, teachers and administrators. Hence the decision was made to proceed with the study of school situations. We proceeded realizing that the identification of situational understandings was an exploratory attempt to include multiple viewpoints of knowing in a major evaluation.

In reviewing the "evaluation war" between the logical positivism tradition and the phenomenological traditions, Smith (1978) argues that complementary viewpoints in evaluative practice can support 'the practical unity of knowledge' rather than resolve which knowledge best represents the truth. Although complementarity would appear a helpful notion during a time when a range of paradigms are receiving increasing recognition in educational inquiry, the concern for practical utility fails to clarify how ways of knowing (and interests) interface in formulating recommendations. Employing a multiple perspective approach in our assessment certainly made us 'feel better' when making recommendations. Yet it would seem how one approaches complementarity ultimately depends on whether one has an interest in the certainty of claims for all situations or in the intersubjective nature of understanding a situation. In addition, to these epistemological concerns, we must make

problematic the interface of a complement of knowing with curriculum policy, an increasing issue of evaluation (Wilson, 1979).

A second implication of situation studies is the sense of valuing inherent with situational understanding. Understanding subjective meanings provides a description concerning the worth of a situation that reflects the 'insider's' concern for the quality of life (Wilson, 1978). In other words, evaluative criteria internal to rather than external to the situation becomes the basis for the evaluation. In this instance, value is not seen separate from fact but instead reflects the social meanings individuals give to their daily life. Evaluative concern for improvement, therefore, rests not with how effective a program is in achieving goals but rather with the quality of life associated with the educational process. Descriptions of social meanings are viewed as judgements of particular situations.

A third implication of situational studies is the introduction of methodologies from anthropology and sociology to the field of curriculum evaluation. Current recognition in education for case study inquiry (Stake, 1978) has witnessed an increase in methods for providing descriptions of school programs and classroom life. Similarly, situational studies provide descriptions of educational settings that reflect interpretive understanding. This way of knowing acknowledges not only participant observation and interview practices but also introduces to evaluation, the interpretive methods of documentary analysis and ethnomethodology. These methods which study the life-world people take for granted, have a concern for knowing what is of significance when one seeks to improve the educational process.

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